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# The Reception of Cambodian Refugees in France

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The arrival of Cambodian refugees in France led to an atypical political mobilization in the process of their reception. The balance of political power in France, the sociocultural ‘mood’ (zeitgeist) and the ‘mediatization’ of the Indochinese region impacted on their resettlement and gave them an advantage over other groups of immigrants. This is relevant as it unmasks the truth behind the easily presumed ‘equality under law’ of immigration procedures. Also, it may help us understand the hidden nature of Cambodian communities in France to this day. These conclusions are based on fieldwork conducted within the French Cambodian communities in Lyon and Paris.

**Keywords:** Cambodian refugees, resettlement policy, French immigration, overseas Khmer

## Introduction

Members of the Cambodian community lead a life ‘in the shadows’ of French society. Compared to the multitude of distinct cultural expressions by other immigrant groups, the Khmer are hardly visible. Cambodian trade and commerce is often hidden behind the smokescreen of ‘Asian’ or ‘Chinese’ enterprise. It will be difficult to find a French Cambodian grocery store or restaurant that is proud to promote itself as selling authentic Cambodian products. Either the products are of Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese origin, or the Cambodian owner is actually promoting his enterprise as Chinese (Gilles 2004; Guerassimoff 2003; Hassoun and Tan 1986). Moreover, Cambodian community organizations stay out of the public eye. The activities organized by societies devoted to Cambodian cultural, social or religious traditions are, generally, not listed in directories or event calendars meant for the general public (Nann 2009; Prak 1992). This article proposes that reasons for this relative ‘invisibility’ may be found in the nature of the Cambodian refugees’ reception and resettlement in France.

These subjects merit attention as so far they have not been researched in conjunction and their conjunction may provide us with lessons to be learned on the effective reception and resettlement of immigrant and refugee groups. Furthermore, their study may help governments in realizing their objectives in immigrant reception and community formation. Several elements of the subject central to this article have been studied in France in the recent past. The exemplary ethnographic work of Simon-Barouh (1981, 1983 and 2004) on Cambodian refugee experiences has concentrated on their reception. Her work, however, has only found sporadic resonance in later publications. Cambodian author Prak (1992) seems to be alone in choosing the Lyonese Cambodian community as his subject and describing them as the 'communauté Khmère dans l'ombre', a community in the shadows. Another element, the political and judicial backgrounds of the Cambodian refugees' reception in France, has been addressed by Meslin (2006), who has also conducted social studies on Cambodian refugees. Most notable for this study is the work of Duclos and Cogne (2008) accompanying an exhibition on Cambodian refugee resettlement in the Isère region in Grenoble in co-operation with the Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation de l'Isère. The collection of interviews and essays in this book, however, lacks the methodological rigour of academic research. Remarkably, the effects of the distinct trauma suffered by many of the Cambodian refugees has only been analysed in a very limited number of works, of which the descriptions by Rechtman (2000) stand out by their extensive base in the Parisian Cambodian community. This aspect of Cambodian life in France, and its implications for the nature of community building (Mey 2007: 7–10) will not be addressed explicitly in this article.

This study aims to help fill the gap in studies on this issue in a twofold discussion. First, it will show that the French political power balance within the sociocultural 'mood' (*zeitgeist*) of the sixties and seventies, and the nature of 'mediatization' (or: how things are presented in the media), are essential to understanding the atypical nature of the Cambodian refugees' reception. This argument leads to the conclusion that Cambodian refugees have experienced special treatment, regardless of the apparent objectivity of judicial status under law that is generally presumed as 'equality under law'. Next, this article proposes that the Cambodian refugees' priority treatment has affected their resettlement experiences in France. Both the negative and positive effects of this subjective treatment are discussed and assessed. With this discussion this study aims to contribute to the study of Cambodian refugees who resettled in France by highlighting the distinctive conditions of their reception in a biographical ethnographic approach. Semi-structured ethnographic interviews are aimed at revealing perspectives and attitudes while embedding these in contextual observations. Social network analysis may uncover relations, effects and experiences that would be easily overlooked in a more quantitative approach (Johansson 2004; Hjorth and Steyaert 2004).

This article was written as a result of extensive literature study, the comparison of written data available in archives and personal documents, a number of interviews with members of the Parisian Cambodian community and three months of fieldwork and interviews with the Cambodian community in Lyon in 2010. In the basic assumption of a world consisting of multiple realities that is in the business of continuously producing, renewing and revising itself, this work offers yet another perspective on events to add to the accumulation of histories. It is thus an observation of the diversity of experiences and events, as witnessed in the direct extracts from interviews, and may lay no claim to portraying a uniform 'truth' in its interpretation of the reception of the Cambodian refugees in France.

After an introduction explaining how this study was carried out, first, Indochinese refugees' reception in France is described chronologically and illustrated by personal experiences of Cambodian refugees in the Rhône-Alpes region. This is followed by an overview of French politics and society as these related to immigrants and Cambodian refugees in the 1970s and 1980s. Although the nature of this qualitative study does not allow for causation in its analysis, some propositions on the reasons for the observed invisibility of the French Cambodian community are put forward in the discussion of findings and in the conclusion. Finally, after exploring some pathways for future research, the argument concludes with a reflection on the results obtained.

## **Methodology**

In order to appreciate the arguments put forward, first, some aspects of the methodology of the research are introduced. Considering the complexity of the subject, the nature of the research question and a general lack of longitudinal quantitative data on refugee groups within French (governmental) organizations, ethnographic methods seem most pertinent for data collection. Ethnography may be described as a holistic approach to cultural systems, trying to describe their socio-cultural contexts, systems and meanings. It is based on fieldwork by an active researcher trying to understand, interpret and reflect on dynamic processes and make a 'thick description' of selected cases. A constructivist perspective is necessary here as, instead of quantitative measurements and absolute dichotomies, this study aims at bringing forward descriptions, personal narratives and qualitative assessments. During fieldwork and interviews conducted with former Cambodian refugees and stakeholders in Lyon and Paris the central subjects were: their personal history before arrival in France, the procedures they had to undergo upon arrival and in resettlement, their personal experiences of this reception, and their incorporation into local Cambodian communities and French society.

Lyon was selected as the main research location on the basis of its size and the Cambodian communities' prominence, as well as the concentration of

Cambodian nuclear families in social groups suitable to access by observation, conversation and limited participation. Even though Paris and its metropolitan area harbour the largest number of Cambodians, its size, the fragmented nature and geographic spread of the active communities as well as the historic prominence of the better off 'royalist' social classes arguably render it "atypical" as a research location for this study. Therefore, findings in Lyon were cross-checked in interviews with members of the Parisian Cambodian community in order to triangulate and confirm the results presented in this article.

First, after a thorough study of relevant French and English literature, fundamental questions were identified on the subject of French immigration policy, refugee reception and local Cambodian communities. Formulating questions in these fields enabled progression and comparison within the semi-directive interviews. During the course of three months of research, 20 members of, and stakeholders in, the Cambodian community were interviewed and followed in social events. Some of them were interviewed several times. This group consisted of women and men from 29 to 82 years old and with a considerable involvement in the Cambodian community in Lyon, complemented by five interviews with members of the Parisian Cambodian community aged from 35 to 67.

As exchanges of personal knowledge produced within the social setting of an interview, the triangulation of the information thus obtained was an important part of the research. The information was recorded and analysed:

1. By testing the results using data available in archives, literature and other written sources.
2. By comparing the answers given in subsequent interviews, in additional comments and reactions to the first findings.
3. In the researcher's reflection on the theoretical, methodical and personal implications of the work for her respondents.
4. In an explicit effort to obtain feedback from respondents and other community members on the resulting chronology as described in this article.

This resulted in the following description and interpretation of the reception of Cambodian refugees in France.

### Coming to France

From 1975 onwards, large groups of Indochinese refugees started arriving in France.<sup>1</sup> Typically, Indochinese refugees to France were welcomed at the airport by members of the Red Cross. The arrivals spent their first few weeks in one of four transit centres (*Centres de Transit*) in the Paris region for medical examinations and registration. The non-governmental organization (NGO) France Terre d'Asile handled initial administration and coordination. In later years this organization was accompanied by the NGO

Accueil Cambodgien that subscribed to similar goals. Once on French territory, the arriving refugees were helped in addressing their request for official refugee status to the Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides (OFPRA).

If so needed, when there was no family present in France to welcome them, the resettling refugees were directed towards available housing in particular regional centres. In 1975, there was still institutional flexibility in catering to the arrivals' needs and wants. All parties showed a willingness to cooperate in order to arrive at the preferred solutions for resettlement. However, after 1980, when the largest numbers of Cambodian refugees started arriving, little was left to personal choice. Thus, depending on the time of arrival, refugees were or were not able to choose where in France they would be resettled. The limited number of exiles received on the 'quota' basis before 1980 had the opportunity to choose a community and apply for acceptance in it. The large numbers of refugees arriving later were directed to available locations for resettlement (CRARDDA 1986; Duclos and Cogne 2008). Still, there was always the choice of going about resettlement independently with no support from the participating NGOs. In practice, refugees with family sponsorship seemed to be the only ones who chose this option. Whatever their choice of method for resettlement, for at least six months the accepted refugees received financial support from the Service Social d'Aide aux Emigrants (SSAE).

When refugees decided to accept the help offered, they could find protection in a temporary shelter, a *Centre Provisoire d'Hébergement* (CPH). Many of the formalities around obtaining official residency for these Cambodians were reduced to a minimum as a form of judicial priority treatment (Meslin 2006: 38). Although procedures at this time were generally less stringent compared to recent policies, still, for many members of this group of Indochinese refugees, they seem remarkably simplified and aimed at an easy relocation in France. In order to analyse the reasons and implications of this situation, the focus is now on the Cambodian arrivals.

### **Groups of Refugees**

At the time of the Khmer Rouge take-over in 1975 an estimated 40,000 Cambodian refugees were legally granted asylum in France (Duclos and Cogne 2008). They followed the basics of the process described above. In fact, at that time, the formalities surrounding refugee reception were still in a rudimentary phase and there was little government accountability for the introduction of additional procedures (Masse 1996: 63–65).

In addition to the relatively small group of new arrivals from Cambodia, a second group of Cambodian nationals were also offered refugee status. They were the ones already living in France before the Khmer Rouge take-over, having been granted temporary residency after their selection for study or

internship in France under the educational cooperation agreement between the two countries. Their newly accepted status as refugees was, again, a temporary residency but without the scholarship funding they had enjoyed as bursary students. Theirs was now a refugee status without benefits such as the financial support of the SSAE and health insurance. While losing their grants for study or internships, they obtained residency (a *carte de séjour*) without a work permit (a *carte de travail*). Members of this group were thus forced, either, into the marginal existence of working in part-time jobs in order to get by, or, into the acquisition of French nationality. As a member of this group states and as is mentioned in interviews with his peers:

But it was very difficult because we had no grant. We cannot work. Because, to get a job, you must have a work permit. And to have the work permit, you must have a job. So, this is just wonderful [sic] (Translation of interview, Lyon 8 March 2010).

These two groups were the first groups of Cambodians to live in France as refugees and are most prominent in the Parisian Cambodian community. In 1978 numbers increased dramatically as France continued to receive about a thousand Cambodian refugees per month, in line with the quota placed on the number of entries permitted. This rate of arrivals persisted until the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. It forced the French government to form formal partnerships and institutionalize systems of refugee reception that, till then, had been instigated by social organizations and were provisional in nature (Meslin 2006: 39). The refugees were now strategically dispersed to industrial centres all around the country.

A new and more sizable group of refugees arrived after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, and after 1980, they were joined by Cambodian exiles fleeing from the Vietnamese in the awareness that they had taken over Cambodia for the long term. In numbers, the mass of Cambodian refugees arrived at this time. As opposed to the students, business people and intellectuals arriving before 1979, members of this group were often from rural areas and shared backgrounds as peasants or labourers (Mignot 1984; Mysliwiec 1988). This group included the many refugees who had spent a long time in Thai camps and did not want to return to Cambodia. Reuniting with family members in France, they acquired French citizenship by sharing their siblings' administrative 'record' (Duclos and Cogne 2008; Prak 1992). These refugees had often fled through the camps in Thailand and occasionally by way of Vietnam. They are, in error, often referred to in France as part of the 'boat people', a label generally reserved for the Vietnamese refugees. This error leads to an easy oversight of data on Cambodian refugees included in surveys on 'boat people' and a lack of attention to the distinct plight of the Cambodians, so different from the Vietnamese situation (Meslin 2006).



*The CPH at Bron*

In 1980, the Rhône-Alpes region held about 4,500 Cambodian refugees. They were registered with non-governmental organizations only under the common denominator of being Cambodian and 'stateless'. In 1985, while the transit centres around Paris were inundated with 25,000 to 30,000 Cambodian refugees, only around 5,000 of them were living in the temporary centres in the Rhône-Alpes region. By the end of the eighties, this number would increase to about 6,000 (CRARDDA 1986: 1; Prak 1992: 20).

About 68 per cent of the arriving refugees ended up in regional centres, the CPH. Their number grew quickly as 116 centres were opened in the 1980s to cater to the increased numbers. Aimed at dispersal of the refugee groups, they were spread over 68 French departments. Because these centres were necessarily set up by individual regional public/private partnerships that took some time to form, many of them were not ready to accept refugees until the early eighties. As a result of the autonomous nature of the foundation and management of the CPH as semi-governmental organizations, it is hard to make generalized statements on their aims and organization for France as a whole. Therefore, this study will focus on the CPH at the village of Bron, near Lyon, as an illustration of their aims, management and achieved results.

The centre at Bron did not receive its first 13 refugees until 1983, when it was run in partnership with local and national governments. Before, as of 1976, the reception of refugees in Bron was managed and financed by a Catholic aid organization, the Secours Catholique. In the case of the Cambodians in the Rhône Alpes region, the state had no official place for them to stay until the foundation of this dedicated CPH. When the authorities decided to cooperate in the establishment of a public/private organization, it was decided that the resulting CPH would be dedicated to Indochinese refugees. Its establishment was a result of the cooperation between, among others, the Comité Rhôdanien d'Accueil des Réfugiés et de Défense du Droit d'Asile (CRARDDA, later Forum Réfugiés), the regional government (*Préfecture*), Catholic and Protestant aid organizations and the Centre Pierre Valdo, a centre that usually functions as the regional shelter for immigrants (CRARDDA 1986: 1). To explain this atypical use, the former director of Forum Réfugiés and the Bron centre explains:

The Indochinese refugees received an exceptional treatment, the government did not want them to be housed in the Centre Pierre Valdo. They received a special status as SEA ('Sud-Est Asiatique') and special centres were founded for them, like the one in Bron (Interview, Lyon 20 March 2010).

He attributed this to the then leftist Mitterrand government's wish not to give a propaganda opportunity to right-wing anti-communist sentiment (see political discussion below).



### Management of the CPH in Bron, Rhône-Alpes Region

In many ways the centre in Bron has proved a very successful resort for Cambodian refugees and many other groups of refugees that have been through the process of resettlement in France in later years. In 1989, numbers of Cambodian arrivals in Bron fell sharply. In all likelihood this was related to the ending of the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia (CRARDDA 1989). In 2010 this location, and a similar centre in Lyon, were still in use by Forum Réfugiés, the successor organization to CRARDDA.

CRARDDA management correspondence for the Bron location from 1986 to 1991 shows that the place was used to its full capacity. The organization of the CPH at Bron was officially described as aiming at the long-term integration of the refugees into French society. In order to help them achieve this, language training, primary education for the children and support in finding a job were offered during the six months of a refugee's permitted stay, as well as counselling and advice after they had found local housing. As the archives show, the most urgent problem in achieving its aims, for this centre, appeared to be in finding affordable and local housing for families. In general, new suburbs around Lyon, such as Vénissieux, Vaulx-et-Velin and St. Priest, labelled *Zône à Urbaniser à Priorité* (ZUP) were the only available places to house the Cambodian refugees. In the low-cost and high-rise environment of modernist projects, the *Habitations à Loyer Modéré* (HLM) these newly resettled families shared their environment with many other groups of immigrants. This situation was described by its 'participants' as not contributing to their integration into French society or the formation of local Cambodian communities (Interviews Lyon, March and April 2010; Prak 1992: 125–126).

Regardless of the difficulty in finding housing, however, finding an industrial job was experienced as relatively easy by the 12 interviewed Cambodian refugees remembering this situation. Not only were many of the Cambodian diplomas and prior work experiences considered equal to the French, allowing, for instance, for civil servants to continue building their pensions; the Cambodian refugees also benefited from an informal preferential treatment relative to other immigrant groups in the competition for unskilled jobs with French industrial 'giants' such as Renault (Prak 1992: 20). A number of big enterprises stated their preference for these Southeast Asians on the subjective basis of expected skills, intelligence and mental attitude, thus granting them a relative advantage. This provided them with more opportunities to access the restricted regional job market that was suffering from an economic depression at this time (Interviews Lyon, March and April 2010). Helped by a language course at the CPH and the centre's mediation in finding a job, the Cambodian refugees were also helped by the positive effects of media exposure of their ordeal under the Khmer Rouge and a general French awareness of the special character of the Southeast Asian region as a

former colony. As the child of a Khmer refugee remembers his childhood in the region:

There were always employers for my father. Even in the economic crisis. It was never a problem. (Interview, Lyon 25 March 2010).

Nevertheless, and as a general characteristic of the immigrant job market, the available and mostly low-skilled jobs did not correspond well to individual qualifications. Also, in defiance of the CPH aim to support local integration, a second relocation was often considered necessary to safeguard a regular income that might support a family. The need for survival led Cambodian families to industrial environments in major industrial hubs like Paris, Marseille and Bordeaux.

Despite, or maybe even because of, these movements and forced changes in their personal lives, traditional customs, religious traditions and structures of social and political division remain visible in the Cambodian communities established in French society. Findings show that social networks are still built around religious centres, and the hierarchical structures and moral order so basic to Cambodian society seem to have been reproduced by the first generation of refugees within the limitations of the French context (Prak 1995; Ebihara *et al.* 1994). This reconstruction of a familiar societal order, however, is accompanied by a mentality of not attracting attention as a group. In the public eye, Cambodian refugees in resettlement are invisible, as they display socially appropriate behaviour. As respondents explain, it was generally agreed within the community that it would be ungrateful to 'make trouble' after the hospitality shown by the French government and so many of its citizens (Interviews in Lyon, March 2010). The communities thus developed 'in the shade' and found their way within and around existing societal structures (Nann 2009: 60–61).

This may be illustrated by the position of the Sino-Cambodians. Frequently, information about their resettlement is available as they are seen as part of the community of immigrant Chinese entrepreneurs that is a subject of research more often than the Cambodian French population as a whole. Publications on this group show that Sino-Cambodian refugees who came to France, legally or illegally, were quickly incorporated in the dynamic Parisian Chinese community and have a preference to maintain their traditional social position. Similar to the economic activities and commercial monopoly they held in Cambodia, they also remain active as immigrant entrepreneurs in shops and restaurants in France (Hassoun and Tan 1986: 2; Nicholls 2007: 350–1). Within the Cambodian community this distinct position is acknowledged and the hybrid nature of Sino-Cambodian identity is referred to with the saying that: 'A commercial failure will always be caused by a Cambodian, but when there is commercial success the owner will suddenly be Chinese' (Interview May 2010, Lyon).

### Political Climate in France

The political climate in the France around and after the renowned year of 1968, in the seventies and even in the eighties, may still be characterized as a time of contestation and intense partisanship (Bourseiller 2008: 407–409; Dreyfus-Armand *et al.* 2000: 25). The resettlement of the Cambodian and other Indochinese refugees in the French republic was managed through a deeply centralized system that brought local partisanship to the forefront (La Gorce *et al.* 1979). In these years, politics were dominated by differences that may be traced back to the dichotomy of socialist ‘left’ against conservative ‘right’. This stalemate was embodied in the political contest for the presidency between Valéry Giscard d’Éstaing and François Mitterrand and their respective periods as President.

After the conservative rule of de Gaulle and Pompidou, the much younger Giscard d’Éstaing won the presidential elections in 1974. Trumping a prospective socialist/communist government under his rival Mitterrand, Giscard d’Éstaing managed to bring a fresh right-wing élan. Press reports exulted that finally, a younger generation seemed to have taken over power (INA 1974). Giscard d’Éstaing brought hopes of change, modernization and cooperation within the European community (Bernard 2003). The openness and inclusiveness that were the first hallmark of his government were extended to the Indochinese refugees. It is not difficult to imagine how humanitarian actions for these former colonial citizens fleeing from oppressive communist regimes would fit with the ideals defended by Giscard d’Éstaing. With Jacques Chirac and Raymond Barre consecutively serving as prime ministers, the two governments of Giscard d’Éstaing did not, however, live up to the high expectations. Divisions within right-wing parties, personal strife, accusations of passivity and, finally, the onset of an economic depression in the eighties, led to the governments’ demise.

In 1981, old-time left-wing rival Mitterrand won the presidential elections. His would be a government uniting the left in a strong socialist character and even cooperating with the communist party. Mitterrand presented himself as a staunch defender of ‘suppressed peoples’ all over the world, including, as his 1981 speech in Cancun illustrates, empathy for refugees. Nonetheless, a clear ideological sympathy for the eastern block nations and communist regimes was apparent, which laid conditions on refugee support (Bernard 2003; La Gorce *et al.* 1979). This sympathy for communism made the plight of the Cambodian refugees fleeing from Vietnamese communism almost unimaginable for the more dogmatic French left-wingers, a sentiment resounding even in the local reception encountered by resettling Cambodian refugees in France.

### France as an Immigrant Nation

France has long denied the reality of being an immigrant country. This has resulted in notable inconsistencies between the ambitions of its official

immigrant policies and their practical effects (Noiriel 1988: 335). Even though it was the only European country encouraging permanent immigration in the first three decades after the Second World War, in public discourse the labour migrations from southern Europe and North Africa have long been treated as a trend that would blow over. In this debate, as soon as industrialization in the countries of origin and the state of the French economy would allow, immigrants would just go back 'home'. Consequently, immigrants were either perceived as passing visitors that would leave French culture undisturbed, or, when obtaining French nationality, as equal citizens that could leave their former cultural identity behind. Horowitz and Noiriel have labelled this the 'dichotomization of identity', meaning that:

immigrants who are no longer 'foreigners' are presumed to exchange their former identity for a French identity. Hyphenation, the hardy perennial of American ethnic studies, is logically foreclosed in France (Horowitz and Noiriel 1992: 7).

In the eighties, when the largest number of Cambodian refugees arrived, immigrants to France were subject to rigid immigration policies that restricted their access to full citizenship and excluded non-natives from government employment (Horowitz and Noiriel 1992: 11).

The reception of the Cambodians is atypical, and does not seem to suffer from the strictness of exclusion that characterizes this immigration policy. The close ties between the two countries may be one of the reasons for this particular situation.

### **French-Cambodian Relations**

After decolonization in 1953, contacts and exchanges between France and Cambodia remained both strong and warm. These links were consolidated in the hundreds of Cambodians benefiting from educational cooperation agreements and studying in France. After obtaining an academic degree they returned to Cambodia and become key players in its intellectual life, adding a 'French touch' to its conventions. Furthermore, they were politically consolidated in formal exchanges on the global stage. These close bonds, extending from a shared colonial history, imply that, in general, the educated refugees allowed into France already had a certain degree of knowledge of French culture and language, as well as, in some cases, existing economic and social ties. This rudimentary knowledge of French life and culture, a familiarity and general sympathy, will have facilitated the survival of the new Cambodian French community in their new homeland (Simon 1981; Simon-Barouh 1981). Moreover, the shared social, cultural and human capital resulting from these long-standing warm relations may have facilitated the 'disappearance' of the Cambodian refugees into French society. For lack of a better and less

contested term, we may even label this a ‘successful integration’, according to the intentions of French immigrant policy makers (Prak 1992).

### 1968 and Beyond

The above testifies to the fact that the nature of the priority treatment given to the Cambodian refugees needs to be understood within the historical, social and political context of their arrival in France: the turbulent seventies and their aftermath. It was in the midst of the Cold War, turned bitter after the disappearance of charismatic leaders like Kennedy and Khrushchev. The Chinese revolution was inspiring communist ideals all over the world, as had the Cuban revolution. While demonstrations against ‘the American imperialists’ that had started a war in Vietnam were held all over Europe and the Americas, uprising was in the air. Third world countries were expected to rise up and fight for their freedom from colonial oppression. This was the time for change. This was the time for revolution (Dreyfus-Armand *et al.* 2008: 29, 35, 49).

In France, the landmark of societal revolt is 1968. This year was often referred to as the start of the ‘student protests’. Upon closer examination, however, the level of disruption was more than superficial. Large scale strikes in the automobile and other industries all over the country brought to the fore economic aspects of the general discontent; many other levels of society were affected. In hindsight, it was no less than a social, intellectual and cultural revolution in every sense, touching the core of French, and European society (Harmon and Rotman 1988; Marzorati and July 2007; Singer 2002).

As is the nature of government, until the revolts quieted down, the social-ist/communist uprising by the anti-authoritarian ‘left’ clearly affected the willingness of the conservative ‘rightist’ government to make resources available for its own ideological aims (Dreyfus-Armand *et al.* 2008: 297). Thus, under Giscard d’Éstaing all aid was granted to relocate those fleeing from oppressive communist regimes. In public and political discourse their arrival and reception was quickly appropriated by the ‘right’ to score points against Mitterrand’s outspoken and conflict-seeking ‘left’ (Meslin 2008: 39): a ‘left’ that had already shown it was a force to be reckoned with in its public actions.

### Signs of Solidarity, Public Eyes on Cambodia and its ‘Mediatization’

In fact, in the dogmatic ideological practice of the time, the Cambodian situation exposed a serious problem. As a former refugee experienced and as is confirmed by a majority of the Lyonnese respondents in his peer group:

‘The left did not listen to the refugees. Even the Cambodian students told us: “Oh, that’s because you’re on the capitalist side. You do not like the

communists.” Afterwards, when the Vietnamese arrived, they saw the reality of Cambodia’ (Duclos and Cogne 2008: 114).

In the seventies and early eighties, the relatively recent memories of the Second World War and the traumatic French war in Algeria may have stimulated empathy for the Cambodian refugees. The reality of the Khmer Rouge regime, however, remained opaque to most French citizens until the late eighties. As a respondent explains, this led to hostile reactions towards the refugees:

Some communities simply did not accept Cambodians. The local communists could not believe that people were fleeing a communist regime (Translation of interview Lyon, March 2010).

In hindsight, the contradictory French relations to the refugees and the political intricacy of the problems in ‘their’ Indochina in the turbulence of the seventies, may be hard to imagine. The situation in Cambodia brought up some difficult questions of solidarity. For instance: how to come to terms with the Cambodian accusations of aggression and take-over by Vietnam, a country that many of the left-wing activists had just been defending against the imperialist tendencies of the United States? How to come to terms with a people that claimed to be seriously harmed and oppressed by a communist regime, while communism was seen by many as the path to liberate the citizens of third world countries? Clearly, the complexity of the situation caused a lot of debate and misunderstanding in the French media on the ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’ of a situation about which not all facts were yet known.

The nature of the French media coverage on the Cambodian atrocities needs to be understood within the polarized global attention that was paid to this war from the start. Journalism often turned to propaganda as the ‘defence of Cambodia’ became a political issue when the country was still closed. As Vickery describes, there was a Standard Total View (STV) in the reports by anti-communist Western scholars that left little room for intellectual nuance. This view, in its turn, was fervently contested by pro-communist scholars in their partisan portrayal of the Cambodian situation. On both sides, little was known of the realities on the ground (Vickery 1984: 36).

Not until the publication of *Cambodge, Année Zéro* by François Ponchaud (1977) did the cruelties committed by the Khmer Rouge regime reach the public domain. Only after the arrival of the refugees was public awareness broadly raised. On television the atrocities committed were widely broadcast and prominent leaders in civil society protested their case. Once the country was opened, aid workers, documentary makers and academics became both actors and media sources in this ‘propaganda’. As a result, reports on the Cambodian situation often lacked the analytical objectivity that may be expected of serious media reporting (Gunn and Jefferson 1991: 308–309).



As a native French respondent who was a student in Lyon at the time mentions:

For us, we all knew about the camp, Khao I Dang, it was like the village next door (Interview Lyon, March 2010).

This is indeed the image also evoked by archived newspaper material and in the reports on Cambodia available in the French national television archives (INA). Even under these circumstances of general knowledge, discussion and understanding, the validity of the French reception of Cambodian refugees remained a question on which opinions were divided. Moreover, experiences show that propaganda and partisanship led to a denial of individual circumstances.

Illustrative of this is the group of critical left intellectuals around Jean-Paul Sartre and Bernard-Henri Lévy that tried to progress the public debate on Cambodia. Their changing of positions produced mixed effects on public opinion. Even in 1979 Sartre addressed the government on the issue of the 'boat people', as aforementioned: a confusing label here meant to include the Cambodian refugees. However, he refused to accuse the communist regime of being inherently defective (Meslin 2008: 39). In 1980 he, and other international public figures such as Joan Baez and Liv Ullman, supported the March for Cambodia's Survival (*Marche pour la survie du Cambodge*) that was initiated by Medecins Sans Frontières, a highly publicized demonstration march on the Thai border next to the refugee camps. In contrast to a similar march for Vietnam, this did not lead to widespread (inter)national political response, however. This lack of effect may be attributed to the Cold War tensions that politicized any defence of the Cambodian victims (Duclos and Cogne 2008: 57–59).

## Conclusion

This study began with the premise that the members of the Cambodian community lead a life 'in the shadows' and have remained understudied in French immigration studies. The description of their reception and resettlement has focused on the historical, economic and social contexts, procedures and personal observations as narrated by the former refugees and other stakeholders in these processes. This description proposes several reasons and contexts for this relative invisibility. It uncovers some important contextual factors such as the socio-cultural atmosphere and political contestations that contributed to an atypical political mobilization on behalf of the Cambodian refugees. This, however, may have affected their resettlement in both a positive and negative way. Conclusions are thus mixed on several levels. Nevertheless, by bringing forward the distinctive conditions of the Cambodian refugees' reception using a biographical ethnographic approach, this study hopes to have succeeded in opening up perspectives and uncovering historical, political and



social relationships that have not yet been described in their connection and interaction, thus making an important contribution to the study of Cambodian refugees' resettlement in France.

The effects on an instrumental level are contradictory. The conflict and complexities inherent in the French contestation of 'left' versus 'right', post-colonial French–Cambodian relationships and the bias apparent in global media coverage in French certainly contributed to dogmatic behaviour towards the Cambodian refugees, as they were considered to be fleeing communism. This confusion may, on the one hand, have provided the refugees with an exceptionally easy run through procedures, easy acceptance of their diplomas and existing work experience as well as willing employers to take them on in a difficult job market; however, it may also have caused prejudice and provided barriers to their acceptance into local communities.

The effects on a personal level seem more positive and clearly enabled Cambodian refugees' relatively smooth inclusion, and invisibility, in French society. The unpreparedness of the French government for the large group of Indochinese refugees led to *ad hoc* organizations for their reception and resettlement. Public–private partnerships were set up and later institutionalized to provide them with provisional housing and first support. Little compulsion and bureaucracy was involved in the reception of the Cambodian refugees. While the setting up of these structures and procedures took some time, it also gave refugee reception a 'face'. There was a 'personal touch' to the way the French state and its citizens cooperated in the resettlement of its new arrivals. Added to the relative familiarity of this group through a shared history and abundant media exposure, this will have facilitated adjustment and acceptance of their life in a new, but well-known, country.

Of course, these findings and their assessment bring forward new questions. What are the effects of the nature of their reception and resettlement on the formation of Cambodian communities in France? What are the consequences of the post-war trauma still suffered by so many of these refugees and leading, sometimes, to complete denial of their Cambodian identity? The effects of the exceptional situation central to this article definitely merit further research into the development of the Cambodian communities in France in the longer term.

1. Refugees continued to arrive till 1989, when the Vietnamese left Cambodia and UNTAC started the repatriation of refugees. However, Cambodians continued to be admitted on the basis of family reunion into the 1990s and beyond.

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